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Rugs and Old Masters: Part 4 - Rugs in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century English Paintings

by Pierre Galafassi

As mentioned in the previous essay, it seems likely that Cardinal Chancellor Thomas Wolsey, with his huge collection of rugs (donated to the King after Wolsey's demotion in 1528), and Hans Holbein, with his quite frequent use of rugs in impressive portraits of British grandees, share the responsibility for jumpstarting a lasting fashion of using rugs in English paintings.

Before Holbein's arrival there was hardly any "English" (1) painting school worth mentioning. In early sixteenth century England, an artist would even rarely sign his name on his work, an indication of his low social status. Even court painters ranked as lackeys and one can assume that they were paid accordingly. No case is known to me of the use of a rug as studio prop until after Holbein's first jobs on English soil in 1528, then this number exploded (1-3). One can safely assume that the rugs were always provided by the sitter, their price being well beyond the means of any of the proletarian English painters.

Throughout the entire Renaissance in Italy, Flanders, Germany and Spain, the majority of paintings featuring rugs had religious themes (mostly "Virgin and Child Enthroned") and in most remaining cases the rug was covering a table in portraits of prominent people. It is remarkable that in England, (following Holbein's example in the famous portrait of Henry VIII in FIG 98), rugs were nearly always shown covering the floor in full-length portraits of royalty and of high ranking courtiers (dukes, earls etc.) clearly as a symbol of exalted power and social status. Although the rugs are spread on the floor in these paintings, it is likely that the best pieces were hardly ever used that way in daily life in 16th and 17th century England, but were kept stored for special occasions. Cardinal Wolsey even caused a scandal by *actually walking* on his rugs. The standard floor covering in the palaces of the elite were probably made of much cheaper, disposable reed mats, which indeed are very often represented by English painters (4)



FIG 98. 1537. *After H. Holbein the younger. Portrait of Henry VIII. Walker Art Gallery. Liverpool*

As also shown in the previous essay, English painters multiplied copies of Henry's striking portrait, apparently answering to a strong demand of the Tudor ruling class. Even Henry's son, young King Edward VI was represented by H. Eworth in this mighty pose, even though it starkly contrasts with the boy's frailty.



FIG 106. 1547 H. Eworth. *Portrait of King Edward VI.* National Portrait Gallery, London.

The rug features a variation of the geometric "small Holbein" pattern, as it is in G. Flicke's portrait of Thomas Cranmer in FIG 107.



FIG 107. 1545. G. Flicke. *Portrait of Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury.* National Portrait Gallery.

One of the most remarkable representations of a rug in any known painting is a superb "small Holbein" with its mandatory kufic border in "The Somerset House Conference" (FIG 108). The author, as so often in England, did not sign his work despite his talent (5). In my opinion, such a precious piece could be much older than the painting. With all due respect to the competence of English moths, it could even have been the star of Cardinal Wolsey's collection. The conventional wisdom is that it was woven in Anatolia, but as discussed earlier (6) this design is quite likely to have originated in Persia where it was a favorite of Timurid kitabhana painters.



FIG 108. 1604. Unknown painter. *The Somerset House Conference*. National Portrait Gallery. London

The unidentified "Master John" made a portrait (FIG 109) of either Jane Grey, (the "Nine-Days Queen") or Catherine Parr (Henry's sixth wife). There might be a doubt about the identity of the sitter but the rug is identifiable as western Anatolian. The border is reminiscent of several extant Konya weavings, like the one featured in FIG 110, and is also very similar to the one in Lorenzo Lotto's 1523 "Husband and Wife" (FIG 87, [linked here](#)). The field is masked, but may also be of the "re-entrant" or "Bellini" type.



FIG 109. 1545. *Master John. Portrait of Catherine Parr or Jane Grey. Detail. National Portrait Gallery*



FIG 110. 16th century. Konya. Re-entrant pattern. *Turkish Handwoven Carpets, Vol 3 Ill 266. TIEM. Istanbul*

An Anatolian border found in many extant sixteenth century Anatolian rugs (from Ushak for example) lurks from under Queen Elizabeth's dress, in van der Meulen's "Hampden Portrait" (FIG 111). Peake the Elder had Lady Cary standing on a rug which field motifs are reminiscent of "para Mamluk" carpets, but the palette rather suggests a Spanish origin (FIG 112).



FIG 111. 1565-1569. *S. Van der Meulen. Queen Elizabeth I. The Hampden portrait. Detail.*



FIG 112. 1597. *R. Peake the elder. Catherine Cary, Countess of Nottingham. Detail. Weiss Gallery.*

One of the many late copies of Holbein's famous standing portrait of Henry VIII features a spectacular and quite original Lotto rug (FIG 113). This field pattern became highly popular in England and even more so in Holland (7), shortly after the beginning of the seventeenth century.



FIG 113. 1600-1610. *Unknown painter, after Holbein. Portrait of Henry VIII. Weiss Gallery.*

Examples of Lotto rugs with similar field and palette, but with a different border (found on extant Lotto carpets), appeared in works by the Flemish John de Critz, in portraits of King James I (FIG 115) and his wife Anne of Denmark (FIG 114).



FIG 114. 1606. *J. de Critz the Elder. Anne of Denmark, Queen of England and Scotland. Detail.*



FIG 115. 1606. *J. de Critz the Elder. King James I of England (& James VI of Scotland)*

Several Lotto rugs (FIG 116, FIG 117) were found in paintings of the rug-crazy painter William Larkin (surely genetically related to an essential pillar of Turkotek), to whom we will dedicate a well deserved attention, later in this essay.



FIG 116. 1615 ca. *W. Larkin. Mary Curzon, Countess of Dorset. Detail. Knole Sevenoaks, Kent.*



FIG 117. 1615 ca. *W. Larkin. Richard Sackville. Third Earl of Dorset. Detail. Kenwood House.*

The patrons of Marcus Gheeraerts the younger, as well, owned interesting Lotto rugs with fully different palettes (FIG 118, FIG 119). In the latter painting, one can catch a glimpse of a rare type of Lotto with a blue background and a peculiar border.



FIG 118. 1634 ca. *M. Gheeraerts the younger. Suzanna Temple, Lady Lister. Detail.*



FIG 119. 1600 ca. M. Gheeraerts the younger. *Elisabeth, Countess of Devonshire. Detail. Birmingham.*

I would like to conclude this far from exhaustive review of "English" Lotto rugs with the one below (FIG 120), painted by Peake the elder. I find the oversized border and narrow field quite attractive. The "4 arrows" motif of the border medallions is frequently found in Lotto rugs in early seventeenth century Dutch- and Italian paintings as well.



FIG 120. 1610. R. Peake the elder. *Henry Frederick, Prince of Wales. Nat. Portrait Gallery, London*

D. Mytens (FIG 121 and FIG 124) and an unknown artist (FIG 123) painted some of the earliest representations of so-called "Medallion-Ushak" rugs, arguably the earliest departure of Anatolian weavers from their traditional geometric patterns, perhaps under the influence of Persian weavers (8). Note also the second rug in FIG 121, on Charles Howard's right hand side. It looks like a "re-entrant" type similar to the extant rug in FIG 122.



FIG 121. 1620. D. Mytens. *Charles Howard, Earl of Nottingham*. Detail. National Maritime Museum.



FIG 122. *Anatolia, 15th-16th century*. Detail. Topkapi Saray. Source: R.E. Mack, *Bazaar to Piazza*, page 83



FIG. 123. 1615-1620. *Unknown painter. Elizabeth Howard, later Countess of Suffolk. Detail. Kenwood House.*



FIG 124. 1620-1625. *D. Mytens. King James I of England. Detail. Knole Sevenoaks, Kent*

The white field "Bird-Ushak" painted in 1601 by Paul Somer (FIG 125) was probably the first and perhaps even the only representation of this classical Anatolian rug by any European painter. The border is uncommon.



FIG 125.1 1601. Paul van Somer. *Henry Hastings, Earl of Huntington*. Detail. Cambridge Univ.



FIG 125.2 «Bird» Ushak 7. Seventeenth century. 175X108. E. Concaro & A. Levi. *Sovereign Carpets*.

Peter Lely, who hardly ever used rugs as studio props, put a so-called "Transylvanian" Ushak (FIG 126.1), similar to the extant rug in FIG 126.2, in a portrait of Henrietta, daughter of King Charles I. One can suppose that the Princess was a rather willful ruggie.



FIG 126.1 1660-1670. *P. Lely. Princess Henrietta, daughter of Charles I. Detail. Exeter Guildhall.*



FIG 126.2 «Transylvanian» Ushak. Seventeenth century. 164X118. Budapest. F. Batari. Ottoman Turkish Carpets.

William Larkin (1585-1619) was only identified some decades ago as one of the most important Jacobean painters of portraits. Unfortunately, he had a very short career. Many of the 40 pictures so far attributed to him are full length portraits, nearly all of them featuring rugs. The facts that the same rug is sometimes used in two or three pictures, that two sisters are represented wearing the same dress, that many sitters are close relatives, have led to the hypothesis that most paintings were perhaps commissioned by the same patron to celebrate a wedding. Richard Sackville, third Earl of Dorset, who is represented in three of Larkin's paintings, could have been the rich patron who supplied the rugs (9).

We have already met two spectacular Lotto rugs selected by Larkin in his patron's collection (FIG 116 and FIG 117). In FIG 127, 128 and 129 the Countess of Suffolk and her relatives, Lady Thynne and Richard Sackville, are standing on three similar, but not identical, "large Holbein" pattern rugs, which probably share a common origin. Anatolia or Spain? I would rather put my 50 cents on the latter country.

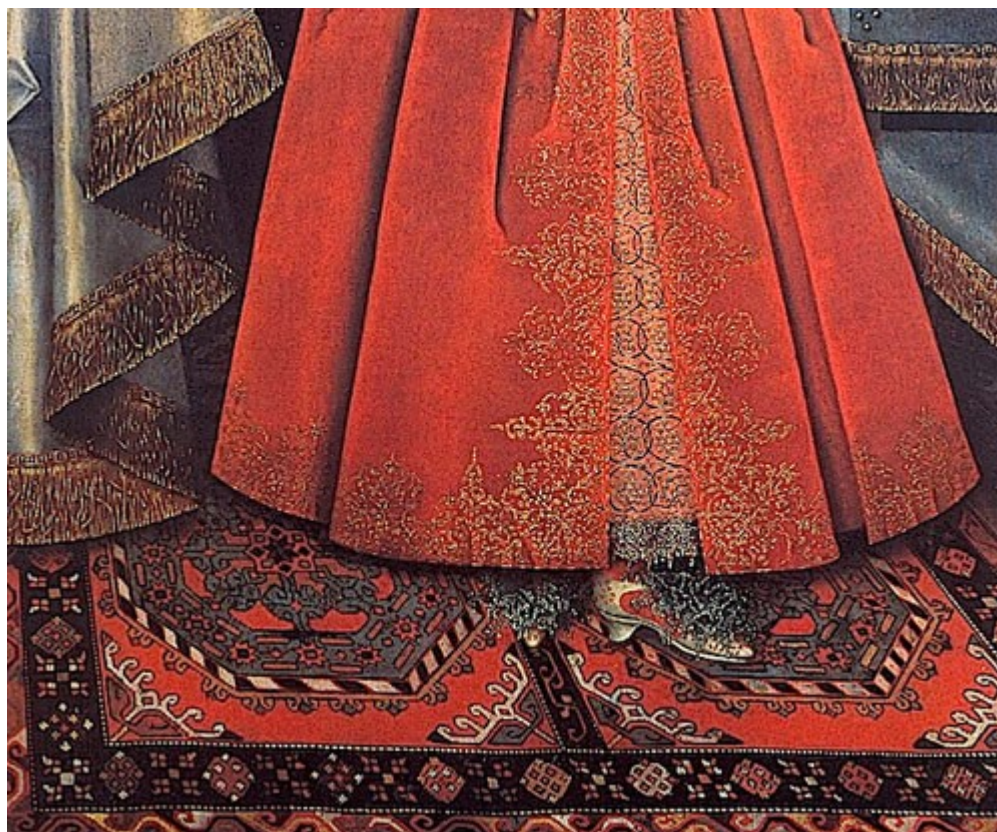


FIG 127. 1615 ca. *W. Larkin. Catherine Knevet Rich, Countess of Suffolk. Detail. Kenwood House.*



FIG 128. 1615 ca. *W. Larkin. Isabella Rich, Lady Thynne. Detail. Kenwood House.*



FIG 129. 1615 ca. *W. Larkin. Richard Sackville, 3th Earl of Dorset. Detail. Knole Sevenoaks, Kent*

The rug in FIG 130 features an ending with a line of "shields" (a frequent motif in Anatolian weavings, although here the shield "filling" is rather peculiar) and a secondary border of six-pointed stars (10).



FIG 130. 1615 ca. *W. Larkin. Elizabeth Bassett, Countess of Newcastle. Detail. Kenwood House.*

The most puzzling rug (FIG 131) in the collection of Larkin's patron features a motif with stylized animals, of a type that was not represented in pictures again for over a century.



FIG 131. 1615 ca. *W. Larkin. Elizabeth Cary, Viscountess Falkland. Detail. Kenwood House.*

As rug experts and their books weren't common in the early seventeenth century, one is left wondering how this kind of motif could have ended on a rug painted around 1600. Was the model a well preserved antique? Was one of the (unidentified) ethnic groups responsible for the 15th century animal rugs still weaving similar motifs about 150 years later? Was it a mere coincidence, the fruit of the imagination of seventeenth century weavers? In the background, on Lady Cary's right hand side, there is another rug of which unfortunately only the main border (a row of six-point stars) and the secondary border are visible. These rows of stars are found in fields and borders of several extant fifteenth and sixteenth century Spanish rugs.

A number of rugs which have no extant counterparts appear in English portraits. While some might be the fruit of the painters' imagination, or, especially after 1620, be the product of an English-, Dutch- or French weaving workshop (11), many are credible oriental carpets. A portrait of Thomas Howard, Earl of Arundel, shows (FIG 132) an interesting field pattern of imbricated "guls", of which there is no extant contemporaneous example of which I'm aware. Was the weaver Anatolian? From the Caucasus? (12) Or even Turkmen? (13).



FIG 132. 1598. *Unknown painter. Portrait of Thomas Howard, Earl of Arundel. Detail. Kenwood House.*



FIG 133. 1572. *Unknown painter. Margaret Douglas, Countess of Lennox. Detail. Royal College*

Fig 133 and 135 show original borders, the poorly detailed field of the former is probably a variation of the Lotto pattern.



FIG 134. 1608-1610. *M. Gheeraerts the younger. Arabella Stuart, Countess of Lennox. Detail. Leeds.*



FIG 135. 1605 ca. *Unknown painter. Arabella Stuart, Countess of Lennox. Detail. Govt. Art Collection.*



FIG 136. 1610-1630. *Unknown painter. Francis Clifford, Earl of Cumberland. Detail.*



FIG 137. 1610. *Unknown painter. Mary, Queen of Scots (posthumous portrait). Detail. Nat'l. Galery of Scotland*

After 1610, English painters of full-length portrait started featuring rugs with floral, curvilinear motifs, probably mostly woven in Safavid Persia or Moghol India (14). One of the first representations of a floral curvilinear pattern is found in D. Mytens portrait of Alatheia, Countess of Arundel (FIG 138).



FIG 138. *ca. 1618. D. Mytens. Alatheia Talbot, Countess of Arundel. National Portrait Gallery, London*

Arguably, the rugs shown in FIG 138, 139 and 140 might have been woven in India and those in FIG 141 and 142 in Persia.



FIG 139. *Unknown painter. Lucy Russell, Countess of Bedford. Detail. Cambridge Univ.*



FIG 140. *1620. P. van Somer. James I of England. Detail. Royal Collections.*



FIG 141. 1640. A. van Dyck. *Young King Charles II. Detail.* Royal Collection. London



FIG 142. 1620-1638. *D. Mytens. Margaret Tudor, Henry VIII's sister. Commissioned by Charles I. Royal Coll. London*

Featuring Persian or Indian rugs in English portraits was a rather short-lived trend since new trend setters, especially the highly prolific Flemish painter Anthony van Dyck and his main Dutch follower Peter Lely, preferred a rather bare floor and somber background: Colorful rugs, whether their motifs were geometric or curvilinear, went out of fashion in English portraits and all but disappeared after 1650, FIG 126.1 being rather an exception.

At about the same time, representations of rugs went out of fashion in Italian and Spanish painting as well. Fortunately for Rugdom, painters of the Dutch Golden Age largely made up for this loss until the end of the seventeenth century, when rugs became rare in paintings there too. However, this is another story which will be the topic of the next essay.

Notes

1. *Painters, often foreigners (Flemish or Dutch), were employed by the Kings of England long before Holbein set foot in the country in 1528 but they had a low status at Court, being assimilated to lackeys and, I presume, being paid accordingly, which in many cases was all their poor skills deserved anyway. After Holbein's stay, this status did improve and some good English painters appeared, although many still failed to sign their work. They catered to the fast expanding and increasingly demanding market for grandee's portraits, but kept competing with «imported» Dutch or Flemish painters.*
2. *The fashion of full-length portraits also made popular by Holbein, surely favored the use of rugs as studio props.*
3. *Well, «exploded» might be slightly overstating it: Let's remember that since the first apparition of rugs in fourteenth century paintings and during the whole Renaissance period, only a very low percentage of paintings featured a carpet. Even in representations of a «Virgin with Child».*
4. *During the sixteenth- and first half of the seventeenth century, reed-mat floor-covering was frequent in standing portraits of the English ruling class, including royalty. There is consistency in their representation (FIG 143). Morocco has been mentioned as their possible origin.*



A. 1562. Unknown painter. Portrait of Henry Stuart. Detail

B. 1595-1605. Unknown painter. Portrait of Elizabeth Howard. Detail.

C. 1567. M. Gheeraerts. Portrait of Robert Devereux . Detail. NPG.

D. 1616. I. Oliver. Portrait of Richard Sackville. Detail. V&A museum

FIG 143. Reed mats in 16th and 17th century England. One can assume that it was the most usual floor covering in Tudor and Jacobean England, in castles of the elite, while less important people used rushes for the same purpose.

5. The painting, which represent peace negotiations between England and Spain at the Somerset House in London was, variously but unconvincingly, attributed to the Flemish J. de Critz the Elder or to his Spanish quasi-namesake Juan Pantoja de la Cruz . Somerset House was a possession of the Crown of England at the time of the painting, and before that, was home of Princess Elizabeth when she was still heir to the crown. It is, therefore, possible that the beautiful rug was a remnant of her father's (and before him Cardinal Wolsey's) huge collection.

6. <http://www.turkotek.com/VB37/showthread.php?t=1391>

7. According to Onno Ydema "Carpets and Their Dating in Netherland Paintings", page 29, some 190 (!) Lotto rugs were featured in Dutch paintings between 1610 and 1690. Occidental rug experts had them classified in a more impressive than useful number of sub-groups, which, I reckon, would have quite puzzled

their weavers.

8. *The Ottoman armies made several victorious inroads in Safavid Persia at the time and, according to the Asian custom, routinely deported Persian artisans to Turkey. For example, in 1514 Sultan Selim defeated a Persian army at Chaldiran, stormed Tabriz and deported 1000 artisans, including, of course, many weavers.*

9. *Richard's father, Thomas Sackville, second Earl of Dorset, was also painted (*), standing on a Lotto rug. It is not unlikely that the family had a tradition of collecting rugs. (*)1605-1608. J. de Critz the elder. Thomas Sackville, second Earl of Dorset. Sissinghurst Castle, Kent.*

10. *These rows of six- or eight-pointed stars are found in fields and borders of several extant fifteenth- and sixteenth century Spanish rugs, of the type called "alfombras del Almirante" Rows of stars seem less common in Anatolian rugs of the time.*

11. *The production of "Turkish style carpets" started in France in 1608 in a few rooms of the Louvre (then a Royal Palace). In 1615 the site of production was moved to a former soap-making factory, and was henceforth known as the "Savonnerie". By the middle of the seventeenth century Savonnerie carpets had achieved a good reputation in Europe. The motifs were usually heavily floral, only in part loosely imitating Persian- or Turkish models. Immigrated Flemish rug weavers settled in Norwich during the early sixteenth century, their design, too, imitated Turkish motif or used European style floral motifs. This English production remained limited until weaving centers were also created in Wilton, Axminster (1701) and Kidderminster (ca. 1740). (Source Encyclopedia Britannica). The once thriving rug production of Mudejar weavers was still active in Spain during the sixteenth- and seventeenth century, but their motifs were increasingly inspired by Renaissance- or Baroque style and less by the Islamic tradition.*

12. *Rugs of Caucasian origin have not been identified in any Renaissance painting, as far as I know, but contemporaneous Italian inventories frequently mention a large proportion of "Circassian" rugs. It seems quite likely that at least a few of them were featured in paintings, but that we fail to identify them as such.*

13. *Hardly any Turkmen rug was ever identified in paintings before the nineteenth century. It is of course possible that very few of them made it out of the remote encampments of the 15th-18th century Trans-Caspian Turkmen and that therefore none was immortalized by an occidental painter. Alternatively, it could be that four centuries ago, many Turkmen rugs differed too much from the 18th and 19th century extant pieces, for us to identify them in paintings. The former option seems the most likely to me.*

14. *Even in Italy, Persian carpets were rarely mentioned in inventories before the early seventeenth century.*

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